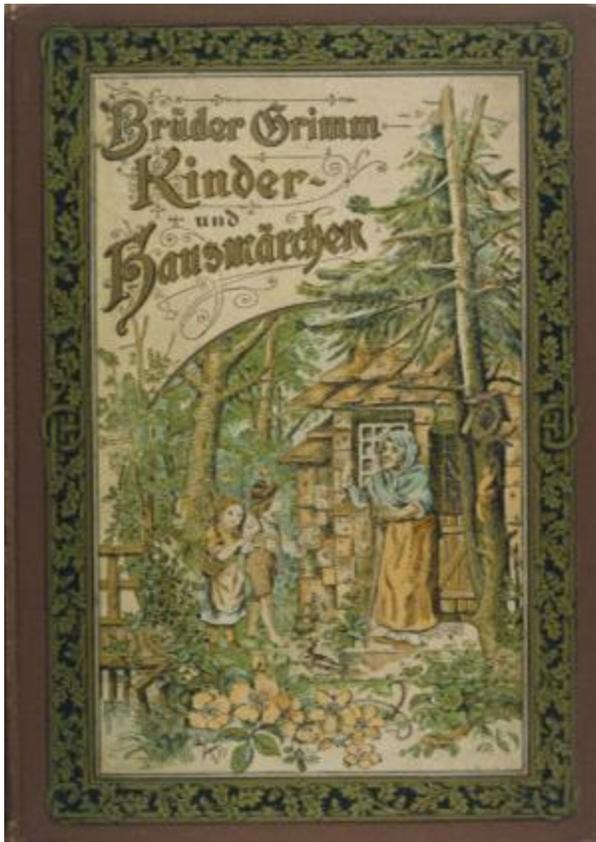


**CIM Opera Theater: *Hänsel and Gretel*
a conversation with JJ Hudson**

By Mike Telin



The first volume of children's tales published in Germany by the Brothers Grimm in 1812 includes some of today's most beloved stories — *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Rapunzel*, and *Rumpelstiltskin*. That volume also includes the tale of *Hänsel and Gretel* in which two children cleverly outwit a witch.

On Friday, March 27 at 7:00 pm and Sunday, March 29 at 3:00 pm, Engelbert Humperdinck's opera, based on the Brothers Grimm fairy tale, returns to the Kulas Hall stage at the Cleveland Institute of Music in performances by CIM Opera Theatre. JJ Hudson directs and Harry Davidson conducts the CIM Orchestra. The production, which has a running time of two hours and twenty minutes with one intermission, will be sung in German with English supertitles. Tickets are available [online](#).

I caught up with JJ Hudson by telephone and began our conversation by asking why they chose this particular title for the spring opera.

JJ: This year we will have produced two operas based on fairytales — Judith Weir's *Blonde Eckbert* in late January and now *Hänsel and Gretel*. Both introduce our students to early German romanticism and its themes: mystery in the forest, witches, birds that speak, and otherworldly things.

The two operas are very different in tone. We know that the *Eckbert* was really dark. And *Hänsel and Gretel*, as Humperdinck said, is very light.

Mike Telin: We often associate Hänsel and Gretel with Christmas.

JJH: The idea for the opera was proposed to Humperdinck by his sister Adelheid Wette, who approached him about writing music for Christmas songs she had written for her children based on the fairytale.

If I remember correctly, it wasn't intended to be an opera, just pieces for Christmas. But of course with sugar and candy it kind of fits into Christmas time.

It's a wonderful piece, and we're taking a very family-friendly approach to the production. We hope that families and kids will come.

The music is bright, happy and full of life. And even the parts that are dark and scary are done sort of tongue-in-cheek. It's very much a childhood imagination of darkness and scariness.

MT: I hear you have something special in store for the scenic design.



JJH: We do have a little bit of a surprise planned. When I first started thinking about Hänsel and Gretel and knowing that it's such a beloved children's fairytale I started thinking about my own childhood. One of the things I loved was pop-up books. I loved just watching worlds come to life with the turn of a page, things popping up. But it's not just that they pop up, it's that you as a reader have a kind of agency in pulling tabs to make the birds' wings flap. Or you can make the sun turn to moon, then back to sun.

So we decided to let the scene changes and the magic that needs to happen, happen in view of the audience with the performers themselves manipulating the set pieces. So like a child's pop-up book, things pop up and turn, and open and close.

Our scenic designer Dave Brooks has put in a lot of clever things to allow for smooth scene changes that resemble the action of a pop-up book.

MT: From the very first notes from the horns, the music draws you in.

JJH: It does. The overture contains snippets and foreshadowing of all the great tunes in the show. Those horns of course introduce the evening prayer, and you hear that music again in the ballet pantomime where the gates of heaven open and the angels descend. I told my students I hope that's what heaven sounds like. It's so powerful and beautiful. Those are the pearly gates that I want to see and hear.

MT: It's a long blow for the orchestra and for the singers.

JJ: When I was a teenager and I first saw Hänsel and Gretel, my first impression was the size of the music compared to the size of the story. I remember thinking, this is such majestic music for such a simple story. Even rhythmically it's challenging. But of course our job is to make everything seem effortless like seeing a duck skating along the top of the water. You don't see its feet flapping underneath.

It calls for a large orchestra, but I think our students have found this to be a beautiful challenge to make sure that everyone can be heard over such a big brass section. And it's a fast-paced show. It throws a lot at you and a lot of tunes. It's compact in its denseness.

MT: Is there anything you think people should know about the production?

JJH: We're doing it in German with English supertitles, but hopefully we're telling the story in a way that's super clear so that children won't need to read them. They will know exactly what's going on.

MT: Anything else?

JJH: I think people should just come prepared to be delighted.

The double cast includes
Hänsel — Caroline Friend, Morgan Potts
Gretel — Catherina Carrington, Emilie Williams,
Mother — Kiana Lilly, Ariel Wong
Father — Davis Fischer, Hyeondo Park
Witch — Calysta Tamara Jacobs, Hanyue Zhang
Dew Fairy — Ro Alia, Yifei Huang
Sandman — Daniela Pyne, Logan Windley

Published on ClevelandClassical.com March 19, 2026

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)